

Testimony of Katie Nickerson, Student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work

Education Committee
Friday, March 11, 2011

In support of H.B. No. 6541 An Act Concerning English Language Learning

Good Afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Katie Nickerson, and I am currently a first year student at the UConn School of Social Work in West Hartford. I am basing my testimony today on the experience of working with at-risk youth at a Connecticut school last year ('09-'10) with the Public Allies Connecticut program. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.

I am here in support of H.B. No. 6541 An Act Concerning English Language Learning. Thank you for paying attention to this extremely important issue. I urge you to amend this bill by requiring that the study specifically look at English Language Learner (ELL) students and issues of self-esteem in the classroom, as well as the issue of ELL parents facing limited communication with educators and the effect it has on their child's academic performance.

Amendment Part 1: Research Issues Pertaining to the Adequacy of ELL Services Offered and ELL Students' Self-Esteem

I believe it is very important for the Connecticut Department of Education to study issues relating to ELL in Connecticut in order to better serve Connecticut students and their families. I say this because many families whom I worked with last year were English Language Learners and I felt that they did not receive adequate services to help their children successfully participate in the Connecticut education system.

As an example, one student I worked with came to the United States with no previous formal schooling and was placed in the fourth grade with very minimal ELL services. The lack of ELL services provided by the school made it very difficult for this child to participate in class activities and complete required assignments. From my perspective, this child's self-esteem suffered greatly because she did not feel "as smart" as her peers and constantly compared herself to those peers performing at a higher academic level. If we are going to require that classrooms be taught in English in most Connecticut schools, then shouldn't we supply adequate ELL support services to those students and their families who are new to the country and the English language?

Amendment Part 2: Research Issues Pertaining to ELL Parents and Their Involvement in the Education System

My second point is that the lack of ELL services may further create barriers between teachers, school administrators and families and thus, may affect a child's overall academic success. Last year I witnessed parents who were not bilingual and whom did not speak English struggle to communicate with others in the school setting. Upon entering the school the parents needed a translator in order to communicate their questions and concerns to teachers and school administrators. There was not always someone around to assist a parent in need.

If parents do not feel comfortable communicating with teachers and other school staff because they do not think they will be understood or will understand what someone is telling them, they may be inclined to participate less in school functions, communicate regularly with their child's teacher, etc. This lack of involvement may impede the child's academic success and negatively affect a child's perception of the school. If schools in Connecticut seek to foster increased parent involvement in their child's education, then how can that effectively be done if a parent cannot communicate with their child's teacher to find out how they are doing in the classroom, cannot read a letter sent home, or help their child complete their homework?

I urge you to vote in support of H.B. No. 6541 because I think the Board of Education must study issues related to ELL. I recommend that an amendment be added to H.B. No. 6541 which states that the study will specifically look at the adequacy of ELL services and the effects on a child's self-perception and how the provision of ELL services determines the level of involvement a parent can pursue with the school and their communication with educators.

It is my hope that when the Commissioner of Education reports the findings of this study, recommendations will also be made which will ultimately enable ELL families to get the most out of the Connecticut education system because they are just as deserving of reaping the benefits of a great education as anyone else. The study mandated by this bill will serve as a stepping stone toward creating a more positive education experience for Connecticut's future leaders and their families.

Thank you very much for your time and your consideration of this important bill.

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